

TV Guide  
January 22-28, 1994close  
upMALCOLM X:  
MAKE IT PLAIN

An ambitious study of the charismatic leader (1925-65) who, narrator Alfre Woodard says, helped "black Americans to see themselves not as a minority but as part of a world majority."

The film includes seldom-seen clips of the dynamic speaker addressing his followers and being interviewed by the media, but it's essentially an oral biography that examines his achievements and contradictions through the comments of those who knew him—family members, friends, biographers, supporters and adversaries. They remember a proud and fiercely determined man who, in 1964, declared, "We can never get



Malcolm X in July of 1963

AMERICAN  
EXPERIENCE (CC)  
8 PM **W**

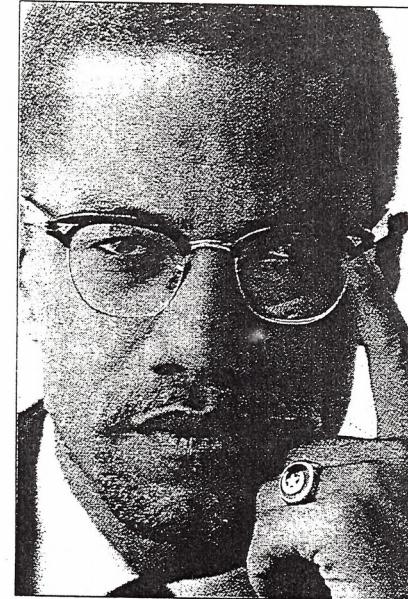
civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored."

The documentary chronicles Malcolm X's emergence as a political force after his conversion to Islam during a prison term; his falling out with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad because, an NOI member contends, Malcolm X's speeches "changed from religious talk to nationalist talk"; and events leading up to his assassination in a Manhattan ballroom on Feb. 21, 1965. "He was indeed our manhood," says his friend, actor Ossie Davis, "a shining black prince who didn't hesitate to die because he loved it." (2:30)

# TV WEEK

*Looking Back  
At One of  
America's Complex  
Figures*

## **'MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN'**



**Morgan, Zimbalist and Matthau: 'INCIDENT IN A SMALL TOWN'**

## Make It Plain: In the Title Lies Challenge

By Michael E. Hill  
Washington Post Staff Writer

The title of this week's American Experience documentary, "Malcolm X: Make It Plain," not only captures a sound bite from Malcolm X, it also summarizes the challenge faced by the filmmakers: How to reduce so complex a man to anything plain enough to be explained in two and a half hours.

The chore rested largely with Orlando Bagwell, who directed and co-wrote the piece (8 p.m. Wednesday, PBS). The project gained financing (some of it from Bill and Camille Cosby) after Spike Lee's feature film demonstrated the lingering interest in Malcolm, said Bagwell.

But after the film and the rush of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" back to the best-seller list, nearly three decades after his assassination in 1965, what's left to learn about Malcolm X?

The key, said Bagwell, lies in the passage of time and the recollections of friends and enemies alike.

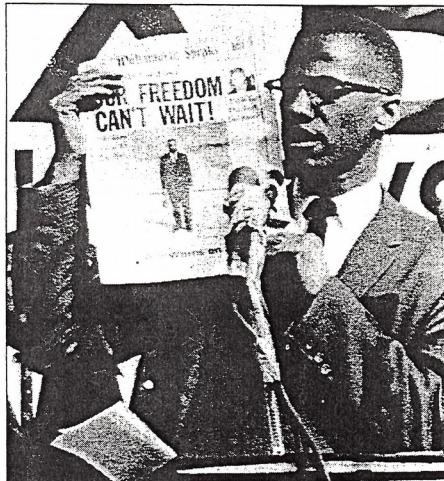
"I think in comparison to the book and movie, one thing that's different," said Bagwell, "we pursued interviews with members of his family, close friends and associates in and out of Islam. People who were once followers by the end of film were arch enemies, and people who found they had to keep their distance from Malcolm at the beginning by the end were in his camp."

"They peel back the image of Malcolm and allow us to get closer, to have a more intimate view of him. They also make the story more emotionally wrenching. His life was filled with tragedy at many levels and they bring us close to that."

The piece consists of abundant interviews, including observations by the late Alex Haley, who collaborated on the autobiography, and they truly reflect many sides of the man. There are also early family snapshots, and details of his childhood that would be enough to inspire an army of revolutionaries. There's the candid discussion of his days of hustling and criminality. You see both the fire and the ashes.

Malcolm X began life as Malcolm Little, growing up in Michigan. When he played with neighborhood children, it's recalled, he was Robin Hood. His thuggish days in New York and Boston landed him in prison, where he underwent a remarkable transformation. He emerged to become the best-known

### 'MALCOLM X'



Malcolm X referring to a copy of Muhammad Speaks during a rally.

AP/Wide World Photos

member of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. From that position, he espoused a brand of black nationalism and militancy that disturbed some black Americans, inspired others, and generally alarmed whites. His pronouncements were in sharp contrast to the more moderate civil rights positions staked out, primarily, by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Bagwell's presentation of the man attempts to be matter-of-fact.

"We tried not to engage in an analysis," said Bagwell. "We try not to define him, but let him speak for himself. You follow a kind of intellectual growth and evolution that he goes through."

The documentary, co-produced by Henry Hampton's Blackside, Inc. (they did "Eyes on the Prize"), features a number of extended film clips of Malcolm X's speeches and interviews. It also dwells on his final days, more so, Bagwell said, than the book and movie.

"We thought it was important to develop the last year," said Bagwell. "We found in the autobiography as well as the feature film that's something you don't get developed with real depth." It was a highly dynamic period, Bagwell noted. "We thought it important to spend time with that period, to give an idea of all the changes he was going through, the way he was reorganizing his ideas, and to represent the dangers he was facing in the last year. We tried to give the complexity of the situation, what it meant for him to walk away from the Nation of Islam and to be his own person. We see it from his side as well as the Nation of Islam's."

The documentary, introduced by historian David McCullough and narrated by actress Alfre Woodard, took three

years and, Bagwell said, \$1 million to make. The Spike Lee feature, which gave momentum to this project, also prompted archivists to put higher prices on their Malcolm X material, Bagwell said.

When it's over, the barrage of images and the non-judgmental style of the production leave Malcolm X much the enigma he's always been. Loved by many, feared and despised by others.

He is summarized by one woman: "He took on America for us."

And a man recalls his first exposure to Malcolm X. Once you heard him, he said, you were never the same again. You might not agree with him, but at least you had to rethink what you believed.



Young Malcolm Little.

Bruce Perry/Stion Hill Press

## TELEVISION

# Producer's a member of the X Generation

Appreciation of Malcolm is the work of a lifetime

By ERIC REEDER  
Daily News TV Critic

It was the winter of 1963, and Judy Richardson, 15 and barely out of high school, found herself covering the swelling civil rights movement from a tiny office over a beauty parlor on an Atlanta side street: the national headquarters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Born and reared in Tarrytown, Richardson had enrolled at Swarthmore College and, while still a freshman, joined classmates on a bus trip to help integrate public facilities in Cambridge, Md.

Afterwards, on a chance detour through Atlanta, Richardson happened to meet SNCC leader James Forman. Forman had a secretarial job when he learned of her typing and stenographic skills. On an impulse, she took it.

As Forman's official notetaker, Richardson attended every meeting of the SNCC executive committee — even though, she recalls, there were no women on the committee at the time. "It gave me a bird's-eye view of the entire organization," she says.

Richardson, the 49-year-old co-producer of "Malcolm X: Make It Plain," remains feeling bitterly toward Malcolm from that perch in SNCC headquarters.

"From down there, you know, you're on a certain track. You're getting things done. And here he was doing rabbble-rousing that was detrimental to the movement," she says. "I was caught up in a sense of the beloved society that blacks and whites could have together and the sense that he was trying to split people up."

#### EARLY TO RISE

Richardson's attitudes, like everyone's, had been formed by her parents and forged by her experiences. Her father, Billy, helped organize the United Auto Workers unit at Tarrytown's GM plant, eventually serving as treasurer. His mother, Mae Louise, had only a grade-school education but was a voracious reader.

"It was just assumed that I'd be aware of what was going on in the world," Richardson says, "and I naturally had a certain alliance with working people."

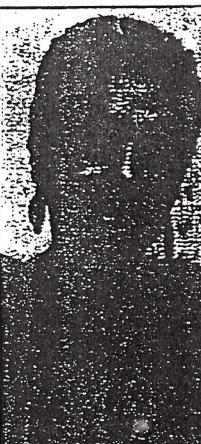
But her mother also tried to shelter her. "She never talked about racism. She didn't want me to be overly conscious of it. She didn't want me to feel different. But when our society and Tarrytown, I always felt different," she says.

"I knew that there were certain places we couldn't live in Tarrytown — there were no black people above Broadway — even if we could have afforded it. I had no black teachers in school. I knew I felt funny when I went into certain restaurants with my friends."

But Richardson didn't understand why. "All the signs I felt I interpreted as 'white only,'" she says.

That changed in Cambridge, Md., on the trip that began as little more than an act of youthful rebellion.

"We were trying to integrate the Chop Tank Inn," she recalls, "and there was this big, burly white guy in the door who said I couldn't come in because I was black. And all the little



JUDY RICHARDSON: "I co-producer"

sights I'd felt came out."

Richardson's views about Malcolm changed gradually, she says. Reading his autobiography helped — as did growing frustrations.

In 1964, for example, she was among those who worked in vain — and by the rules — to get the Democrats to certify the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as the rightful state delegates at the presidential nominating convention.

"It made me realize how entrenched immorality was in the political structure," she says.

#### ACROSS THE X FACTOR

Richardson had greater success working as office manager for Julian Bond's first, historic campaign for the Georgia state legislature, but barriers that were slow to fall gave credibility to Malcolm X's emphasis on community self-reliance.

So did Richardson's increasing focus on education. In recent years, she worked on the two-award-winning "Eyes on the Prize" documentary series from Blackside Inc., the Boston-based production company where she now serves as its director of education.

She finds that a lot of kids today find Malcolm extremely appealing. "What Malcolm is talking about is, as the [Marcus] Garvey movement said, doing for self and how do you become self-sufficient. How do you become a community that is working for your own good and not necessarily dependent on other communities?"

"You see it in the rap [business] when Queen Latifah talks about building her own record company.... You get a sense that there is a self-sufficiency theme that is coming out from young people today, because they see that in Malcolm."

NEWS  
FROM



# VIKING

## MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN

Text by William Strickland

with the Malcolm X: Make It Plain Production Team  
Oral Histories selected and edited by Cheryll Y. Greene

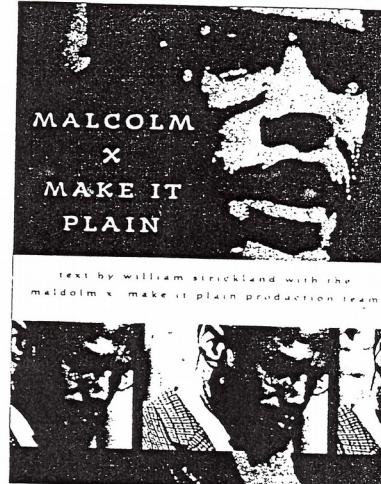
Publication Date: January 26, 1994

Contact: Patti Kelly  
Associate Director of Publicity  
(212) 366-2147

The voice of Malcolm X, silenced so abruptly nearly three decades ago, speaks today to more people than ever before. His autobiography sells more than 150,000 copies a year, his writings are devoured by thousands born after he died. But who was he? Drawing on hundreds of sources, **MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN** is the companion volume to the "American Experience" documentary of the same name, which premieres on PBS on January 26, 1994. The book explores Malcolm's many-faceted character--political philosopher and visionary, husband and father, dynamic orator, and hero--and the many forces that forged him.

Rare photographs and personal memories interweave to tell the story of Malcolm's youth on the streets of Boston and New York, his world travels, his life within the Nation of Islam, his assassination in 1965. An essay by the acclaimed writer William Strickland highlights the African American urban experience mirrored by Malcolm, and how we are still living through the history he helped shape.

Blackside Inc., best known for its award-winning "Eyes on the Prize" PBS film series on the civil rights movement, is one of the oldest minority-owned independent production companies. William Strickland is an associate professor in the W.E.B. DuBois Department of African American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and served as academic consultant to "Eyes on the Prize." Cheryll Y. Greene, former executive editor of *Essence* magazine, heads Cheryll Y. Greene Editorial Services in New York City, and has worked with many of America's finest authors, journalists, and scholars of the African American experience.



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Studies/History

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"The book is a wonderful tribute to Malcolm and will go far in keeping his legacy alive."

*Paule Marshall, novelist, Daughters*

our curriculum for our Malcolm X exhibit scheduled for September of this year."

*Linda Lucero, Associate Director of Education and Community Resources, Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco*

"I found it to be a completely *new* look at the man . . . extraordinary that there was so much about Malcolm X that had not been revealed before."

*Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, Dean, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University*

"The best book on Malcolm I've read yet."

*Nat Hentoff, columnist, The Village Voice*

"It is beautiful. Well done. . . quite an achievement."

*Charles Fuller, playwright, "A Soldier's Play"*

"The book is everything one could want: informative, beautifully designed, and a joy to read. We will use the book in developing

### *Selected Quotes About*

## **MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN**

*(Viking, 1994)*

*Text by William Strickland  
with the MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN  
Documentary Production Team*

*Oral histories selected and edited by  
Cheryll Y. Greene*

"Thank you for bringing Malcolm to us through many voices. It was a wonderful presentation and is a beautiful book."

*Lana Turner, The Literary Society, organizers of annual African-American Read-In, New York City*

"Malcolm X: Make It Plain is a lovely work."

*Lisa Jones, author, Bulletproof Diva, and columnist, The Village Voice*

"Even with the plethora of books already in print on one of America's most enigmatic figures, this well-written biography featuring more than 200 black-and-white photographs – some as rare as they are remarkable – is a welcome addition."

*Quarterly Black Review of Books*



# DAILY NEWS



50¢

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Wednesday, January 26, 1994



American Experience" series on public television reaches that special place again tonight with the documentary "Malcolm X: Make It Plain."

So much of the time, TV documentaries get squashed into one hour and are known more for what is left out than what is told.

"The American Experience" series does not operate that way. Judy Crichton, who is executive producer, has steered this series to a level that may be unmatched by anything in the country, maybe the world.

Tonight, on the eve of Black History Month, the Public Broadcasting Service (Channel 13 in New York) focuses on Malcolm X. In telling his story, the documentary also sheds light on the workings of the Nation of Islam and puts into perspective much that is taking place now:

■ *Why did Muslims respond as they did when police recently entered Mosque Num-*

## An insightful TV look at Malcolm X

ber 7 in Harlem?

■ *Why did so many black men crowd their way into the Harlem armory two nights ago to hear Louis Farrakhan, who now leads the Nation of Islam?*

■ *Why is it that blacks are the largest group gravitating to the Islamic religion?*

Insights that help provide answers to all those questions are bound up in this documentary. But the focus is on Malcolm X, and Malcolm alone. It is in many ways the most comprehensive look ever at the man Ossie Davis eulogized for African-Americans as "our shining black prince."

Even now, almost 30 years after his death, Malcolm X still stands apart as a leader of blacks Americans. The "why" in that is the story line in this 2½-hour special co-produced by Orlando Bagwell and Judy Richardson.

■ *What is it that sets this look at Malcolm X apart?* It has a ton of footage introduced for the first time on television. It has the voices of Malcolm's brothers Philbert and Wilfred Little. It has the voice of his oldest daughter, Attallah Shabazz, and that of Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz.

Spike Lee, in his acclaimed feature film, did an awesome job with his story of Malcolm X. But you do not compare what Spike did with this piece of work. They are different; they set out to be different and, on the whole, tell different stories.

This film explores Malcolm's death and his deadly dispute with Elijah Muhammad, then the Nation of Islam leader. There is a rare inside telling of "what happened" from Captain Joseph X, who, in Malcolm's time, headed the Muslim security force known as the Fruit of Islam.

This film has footage and inside accounts of the 1957 confrontation in Harlem between the members of Mosque Number 7 and the New York City police, and it has a compelling account of the 1962 confrontation in Los Angeles that erupted when police stormed a mosque. What happened in both of those episodes parallels — and sheds light on — the recent police-Muslim confrontation at Mosque Number 7.

**W**HAT APPEARS on television tonight is a piece of work that was more than two years in the making. Bagwell, who directed the documentary, is a veteran of 16 years of film making. This is his shining moment.

Bagwell and Richardson were producers of the award-winning Blackside Inc. documentary "Eyes on the Prize," about the civil rights movement. So the Malcolm X film is also a large step forward for Richardson, a veteran of the civil rights movement-turned-film maker.

To fund this documentary, the Ford Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting teamed with Bill Cosby and his wife, Camille, and the National Black Programming Consortium. What they got is so powerful that you could argue it ought to be mandatory viewing for all of America.

# Style

## *Malcolm X: The Power, The Tragedy*

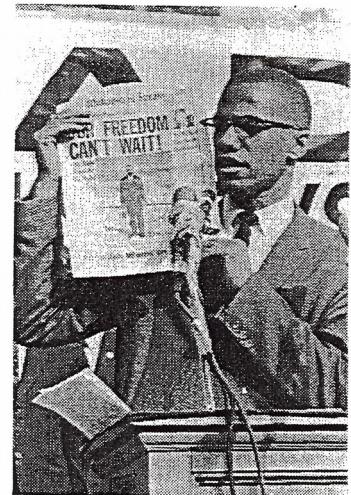
On PBS, Rare Insight  
Into the Nation of Islam

By David Mills  
Washington Post Staff Writer

For years it has struck me that, just as Francis Ford Coppola made the history of the Mafia into a grand, enduring metaphor for the immigrant experience, the story of the Nation of Islam could stand, in all its painful complexity, as a defining saga of 20th-century America.

With its avowed mission being the spiritual restoration of a downtrodden race, the Nation has confronted the fundamental psychic and political problems of contemporary black Americans: the matters of identity and self-esteem, of economic empowerment, of how to deal with white people. The Nation of Islam's fundamental solution? A potent mythology of black godliness and white demonism—an inversion, that is, of the widely inculcated mythology of white supremacy.

As with the "Godfather" films, though, this is also a tale about the nature of power. Ambition, jealousy, betrayal, revenge—the



"Malcolm X: Make It Plain" benefits from abundant footage of the activist's speeches.

themes are classically tragic. And, as Malcolm X's tomb attests, there is profound tragedy in the story of the Nation of Islam.

"Malcolm X: Make It Plain," a 2½-hour documentary by Orlando Bagwell, provides fascinating insights into the dramatic history and guarded culture of the late Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. A presentation of the PBS documentary series "The American Experience," it airs tonight at 8 on Channel 26.

To date, most of what is popularly known  
See MALCOLM, D10, Col. 1

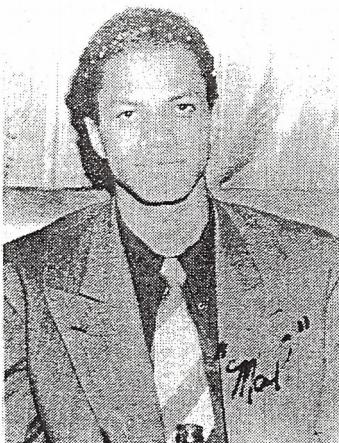
# ‘Malcolm X: Make It Plain’

MALCOLM, From D1

about the development of the Nation of Islam has come in the context of Malcolm X's life, from his own posthumously published autobiography to Spike Lee's splashy Hollywood picture. And the story of Malcolm X, by the parameters he set himself, is one of personal redemption. A twofer at that: Malcolm is transformed from ignorant criminal to righteous follower of the Messenger of Allah; then, from black racist to humanistic adherent of orthodox Islam. “Make It Plain” neither undercuts nor independently confirms the myth of Malcolm, the Twice Redeemed. It simply surveys much of the territory mapped out in “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” albeit with valuable new testimony.

One great strength of “Make It Plain” is its abundance of footage of Malcolm X in the midst of extraordinary oratorical performances. Although these film clips are black-and-white, they're often pristine and seem utterly current. Malcolm's piercing eyes and jabbing finger and commanding voice—the striking sincerity of him—make him a living presence in the room, not just some image on a TV screen. When contemporaries such as Ossie Davis and Sonia Sanchez recall being thrilled and somehow frightened by this one man who dared to express boldly and publicly the resentments of black America, you need not struggle to comprehend. He is a thrilling, somehow frightening figure still, nearly 30 years after his death at the hands of black assassins.

In a moment that goes by without comment, Captain Joseph X (Yusuf Shah), then a subordinate in the Harlem mosque, recalls the qualities in Malcolm that led Elijah Muhammad to anoint him his national spokesman. “Complexion, height, speech and carriage—all that has to be taken into consideration when you select a man to stand before the people.” *Complexion?* Earlier in the program, narrator Alfre Woodard echoes Malcolm's autobiographical assessment that his reddish skin was a badge of his grandmother's rape by a white man. Could his light skin have really had something to do with his



Malcolm X, tonight's subject of “The American Experience” series on PBS.

rising to power in the Nation? Joseph X may not be the most objective witness; it turns out, by the end of “Make It Plain,” that he was an Elijah Muhammad loyalist who, to this day, considers Malcolm X a despised “hypocrite” for leaving and denouncing the Messenger. Still, this sort of curious comment makes the case for a deeper exploration of the inner workings of the Nation of Islam.

“Make It Plain” includes other voices rarely heard: Malcolm's brothers Philbert and Wilfred, who had introduced him to the Nation; his much older half-sister, Ella Collins; Gene Roberts, the New York cop who had infiltrated Malcolm's own organization.

Those who have steeped themselves in the growing literature surrounding Malcolm X's life and death will likely be disappointed that “Make It Plain” doesn't dig deep. Producer-director Bagwell doesn't endeavor to challenge the approved version of Malcolm's early life (was his father actually murdered by racists?), nor does he examine the possibility of government complicity in Malcolm's assassination.

“Make It Plain” succeeds as an encapsulated record of the public life of an extraordinary leader, and as a welcome glimpse into a little-understood movement.

Wednesday, January 26, 1994

TV

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## 'Make It Plain' clear-eyed look at Malcolm X

AS DEFT and passionate as Denzel Washington's portrayal of Malcolm X was in Spike Lee's movie, it could just barely hold a candle to the fire and complexity of Malcolm himself. And as dazzling and inspired as Lee's movie was (the ending sequence aside), it was only a pale shadow of Malcolm's real life.

Now comes producer/director/co-writer Orlando Bagwell, whose task is fashioning the raw material



of that real life into 2½ compelling hours of nonfiction television.

It's possible to quibble over some details — the identifications of some interview subjects change during the show, for example — but by and large, Bagwell and his colleagues have succeeded.

Watch tonight's "Malcolm X: Make It Plain" (Ch. 13, 8 p.m.), and you'll better understand not just the details of Malcolm's life, but the true nature and origins of the principles he espoused, the remarkable evolution of his perspectives, his rarely mentioned wit and the internal disputes that led to his split from the Nation of Islam and, finally, his assassination.

Most of all, as its opening image of a microphone

suggests, the film forges a powerful link between Malcolm X and words.

Whether transfixing an audience from an outdoor platform at 125th St. and Seventh Ave., sparring with print and broadcast journalists, rallying supporters at the Audubon Ballroom or debating at Oxford University in England, this was a man whose impact and legacy were determined almost entirely by the words he spoke.

"Make It Plain" echoes that theme, among others, in the testimony of witnesses who were close to Malcolm and the events that propelled his controversial life. Some of Malcolm's brothers and sisters, his wife and daughter, past and present members of the Nation, colleagues from his Organization of African-American Unity, writers and friends all help piece together the whole.

Bagwell (with co-writer Steve Fayer and co-producer Judy Richardson) devotes the last 45 minutes of the film to the seminal changes Malcolm went through after a pilgrimage in the spring of 1964 to Islam's holy sites in Saudi Arabia and a subsequent three-week tour of Africa.

He returned to the United States with a global perspective on the struggles of black people in

America, seeing them as one cog in a fight for human rights defined not by skin color but by principle and philosophy.

"Make It Plain" also explores in much greater depth and detail the alienation of Malcolm from the Nation of Islam that eventually cost him his life.

It originated with Malcolm's discovery of sexual misconduct by its leader, Elijah Muhammad, transgressions that Malcolm initially tried to overlook. When the Nation later denounced comments Malcolm made after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, he was forced to confront his festering doubts about the organization.

Political maneuvering by rivals for Malcolm's position of power hastened his fall from grace, but his mind-expanding trip abroad made the break complete and final.

As "Make It Plain" makes plain, Malcolm held the public stage for little more than three years. He had an enormous impact in that scant time, and his legacy seems to grow as the years pass.

As with other leaders cut down in their prime, it's impossible not to wonder what he might have achieved had he lived.

USA Today

Wednesday, January 26, 1994

## TV PREVIEWS / MATT ROUSH

# 'X' runs deep; 'Babylon 5' babbles on

"Do you consider yourself militant?" Malcolm X once was asked. "I consider myself Malcolm," he coolly replied.

That says it all.

If only it said more.

*Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (★★★½, PBS, tonight, 8 ET/PT, times may vary), an excellent 2½-hour production of *The American Experience*, does what its title suggests: presenting the controversial black leader with a minimum of manipulation (take that, Spike Lee), delicately balancing objectivity with intense intimacy.

Made plainest is his charismatic force as a warrior of words and ideas, dynamically preaching racial separatism and self-defense. Malcolm's impassioned yet decorous bluntness terrified many whites; for blacks, the message stimulated and mystified.

Much of the mystery lies in the man's extreme contradictions: honor student turned



By Robert L. Haggins  
**MALCOLM X:** PBS examines the leader's 'naked honesty.'

street hustler; prison inmate turned volatile and articulate spokesman for Elijah Muhammed's Nation of Islam;

family man and embattled agitator; a martyr or traitor, depending on who's talking.

And producer Orlando Bagwell (*Eyes on the Prize, The Great Depression*) gets many people talking, from family members — including a brother ordered to speak against him "to strengthen the Muslims" — to followers, critics and journalists, all fascinated by Malcolm's "naked honesty" and still intrigued by his remote inner depths.

Bagwell shies from too much speculation, including on the events surrounding Malcolm's assassination after becoming estranged from the Nation of Islam. Unfortunately, the filmmaker also curbs the impulse to analyze Malcolm's legacy. The focus is narrow and deep, but still too limited. Malcolm X deserved at least another half-hour.

**STAR BORE:** As TV bigwigs

gather in Miami this week to shop new syndicated shows, they should take as a warning call the debacle of the new outer-space adventure *Babylon 5* (\*, syndicated, check local schedules). Even if all the promotion pays off with ratings, this beyond-cheesy stupor-nova is a black hole of opportunistic programming that gives the genre and industry a black eye.

Like a dinner-theater *Deep Space Nine*, this is a space-station drama of testy aliens — including one hammy species that looks like Grandpa Munster with Patti LaBelle hair — who commingle with less-interesting humans from the Petrified Forest School of Acting.

You keep expecting those pesky cut-ups from *Mystery Science Theater 3000* to lob barbs at the screen. It would be lots more fun, that's for sure.

For junk like this *TV Guide* started a sci-fi column? This isn't a trend. It's a trudge.

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TELEVISION

AN 'AMERICAN EXPERIENCE'

## Malcolm X's Life In Sharper Focus

**S**PIKE LEFF'S three-hour biopic, "Malcolm X," concludes with a few minutes of black-and-white footage depicting the real Malcolm in action and in thought. Seeing these grainy, yet electrifying images, you can't help wondering where this guy was throughout the rest of the movie, especially those parts where he suddenly bursts into a sky boyish laugh. From such glimpses, you yearn to know Malcolm better as a man as opposed to an icon.

It is to the considerable credit of "Malcolm X: Make It Plain" (WNET/13 at 8 tonight) that it enhances this human side of Malcolm — though not enough to make it the groundbreaking it could have been. Still, this 2½-hour entry from PBS' admirable "American Experience" series is, by far, the most balanced, sensitive and thorough exploration of Malcolm's life you put on film.

One reason for this is that there are many voices besides Malcolm's that are heard here. The most obvious: Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow; the late Alex Haley, who co-wrote Malcolm's transcendent, transforming autobiography; Ossie Davis, who eulogized Malcolm at the latter's funeral.

Other voices are revelatory: Malcolm's brothers Willard and Philbert, who, as Muslims, were caught in the middle of their brother's feud with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad; Peter Goldman, the *Newsweek* reporter who was one of the few white reporters Malcolm trusted; Gene Roberts, the New York police officer who infiltrated the Nation of Islam and was present at Malcolm's assassination in February 1965.

These and other witnesses add many fine details to a story that, by now, has been deeply ingrained in Americans' collective memories: Malcolm Little's strong black nationalist upbringing; the loss of both parents, one to death, the other to mental illness; his street hustling days in Boston and Harlem; his arrest for burglary, imprisonment and self-transformation as Black Muslim Malcolm X; his meteoric rise to fame and/or notoriety; his split with the Muslims and the search for higher moral and political ground preceding his death at 39.

Among the many facets introduced into this tale is Willard X's recollection of how, as a child, Malcolm had enough charisma to convince the white kids he played with that he should be Robin Hood. Malcolm Jarvis, the onetime hustler Spike Lee played in his film, provides the richest recollections, besides those of Malcolm himself, of their criminal past.

Some of the more intriguing testimony comes from Wallace D. Muhammad, son of Malcolm's mentor, who is bracingly frank about both the rupture between his father and his star minister and is also shrewd in assessing Malcolm's somewhat self-



PBS presents 'Malcolm X: Make It Plain' at 8 tonight.



Gene Seymour

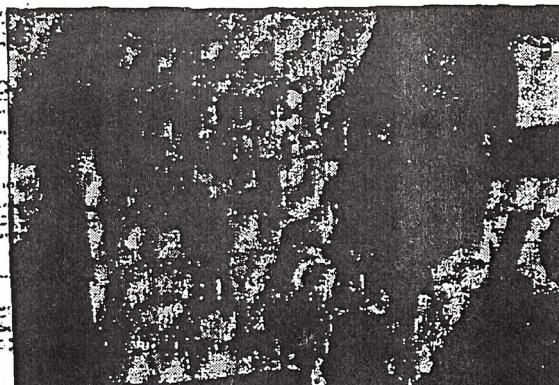
destructive streak that may have only hastened his untimely end.

Penetrating observations like these are set against — and ultimately outweighed by — testaments to Malcolm's forceful personality submitted by poet Sonia Sanchez, Harlemite Peter Bailey ("Once you heard him speak, you never went back to where you were. You had to rethink your position on everything.") and historian John Henrik Clarke ("He encouraged black people . . . not to move into the house of our oppressors, but to build our own house").

All of which, if you didn't know before, you will know for certain after the film is over. Producer-director-co-writer Orlando Bagwell and the production company that made "Eyes on the Prize" and "The Great Depression" have done their jobs well on that score.

And yet, the human dimension of Malcolm, in all its complexity, remains at a frustrating distance. In footage of his speeches and interviews, you hear his voice burning holes through the screen and feel his magnetism. But you want more. You want the man who still has that warm smile of remembrance to just about everyone he survived (except for Joseph X, a Fruit of Islam captain who still believes Malcolm to be a "hypocrite, a Benedict Arnold").

In the very last film clip, a newsman asks Malcolm if he considers himself a militant. The grin lights up. "I consider myself Malcolm." And as with Lee's epic, you are left thinking that there just has to be more to this man than what you've just seen. Still, "Make It Plain" succeeds greatly in nudging us closer toward a clearer, sharper, fuller picture. ■



Malcolm X was a convicted criminal, philosopher, orator, minister and leader. *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* reveals all aspects. The *American Experience* biography airs at 8 tonight on Channel 8.

## Malcolm X' reveals a compelling man

**MARC GUNTHER**  
Knight-Ridder Tribune News

### TV review

It's an audacious idea: PBS wants you to set aside an evening of prime time tonight to watch a 2 1/2-hour biography of Malcolm X.

But time is relative. Consider that *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (8 p.m., Channel 8), this week's edition of *The American Experience* history series, took nearly three years from the lives of the producers, Orlando Bagwell and Judy Richardson.

More important, the film delivers rich returns for your investment of time. *Malcolm X* shines as history, as a dramatic personal story and, most of all, as a film with a provocative message for all people who are troubled by the plight of blacks in today's America.

One more payoff: The real Malcolm X, who's on camera through much of the film, is every bit as compelling a character as the better-known Malcolm X created by actor Denzel Washington in the 1992 feature film.

As history, *Malcolm X* strives to be fair. Bagwell and Richardson, whose credits include *Eyes on the Prize*, rely on the style of documentary-making displayed in that epic series about the civil rights movements. That means that there are no experts and very few, if any,

racist climate of Lansing, Mich., as one of seven children of politically active parents, he suffered early traumas. The family home was firebombed and his father, Earl Little, died at a young age, quite possibly at the hands of the KKK. His mother, Louise, was later diagnosed as paranoid and committed to a mental hospital in Kalamazoo for the next 26 years.

A hustler, petty criminal and burglar, Malcolm found religion in prison, where he fell under the sway of the Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad. He began to read history, literature and religion, and emerged a new man, determined to take command of his own destiny.

His rise through the Nation of Islam was swift, fueled by an obvious intelligence and charisma. This film chronicles the evolution of his political ideas, his growing influence, his bitter split with the Nation (and with his own brother, who remained loyal to Muhammad) and the remarkable final year of his life, when he came into his own and became a worldwide spokesman for black Americans. Most dramatic of all is the depiction of his assassination in 1965 at the hands of three followers of Muhammad — which like

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regator. Instead, they tell their story through the voices of those who knew Malcolm X, as well as in his own words.

"We don't analyse him. We don't define him. We don't speak for him," said Bagwell, a documentarian who works out of Henry Hampton's Blackside Films operation in Boston. "He speaks for himself in this film."

And how he speaks! Agree with him or not, Malcolm X is every bit as forceful, analytical and telegenic as his 1960s contemporaries, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy. The camera likes him, even if the reporters who put often-tough questions to him clearly do not.

Malcolm X's story is also compelling. Born in 1925 and raised in the

King, he eerily predicted a few days earlier.

Here the hands of the filmmakers are most evident. "What we've constructed is a very dramatic and charged story," said Bagwell. "It's very personal at times, extremely emotional at times." Without distorting history, they capture the drama of Malcolm's life.

Coming to grips with the meaning of his life is a trickier proposition, and one that *Malcolm X* leaves to the audience. Clearly Bagwell and Richardson reject some of Malcolm's ideas.

On the other hand, the film makes it abundantly clear that Malcolm's life was powered not just by his God-given talents, but also by his extraordinary determination.



# Entertainment

FRIDAY, JANUARY 28, 1994

## Another X File

*A portrait of Malcolm X less holy than Spike Lee's*

HERE'S A thoroughness and brisk honesty in the latest edition of *The American Experience*, **MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN** (PBS, Jan. 26, 8-10:30 p.m.) that make its 2½ hours zip by. Avoiding the life-of-a-saint tone that characterized much of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* movie, this documentary is a careful exploration of Malcolm's life and thought, directed, coproduced, and cowritten by Orlando

Bagwell. Bagwell, who also worked on two of PBS' most notable recent series, *The Great Depression* and *Eyes on the Prize*, takes care to place Malcolm's political leadership in a context that includes not only the by-now-familiar run through his time spent as the zoot-suited hustler Detroit Red, but also a look at his childhood as the son of Earl Little, a Michigan minister and organizer for the black-nationalist Marcus Garvey movement.

The complexity and contradictions of Malcolm's philosophy are discussed and debated by diverse interview subjects, ranging from Malcolm's brothers to the New York police officer who infiltrated Malcolm's Nation of Islam chapter in the hope of discrediting him. *Make It Plain* has all the virtues of a first-rate piece of journalism, presenting all sides to allow a viewer to form a fresh opinion of a figure obscured by fame. **A**

Television/John Leonard

IF YOU SAW SPIKE LEE'S *Malcolm X*, YOU'LL want to catch *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (*American Experience*; Wednesday, January 26; 8 to 10:30 P.M.; Channel 13), less as an emendation than as a glossary and hypertext. It seems to me that Lee's *Malcolm* was really three movies—the first a gangster flick in which *The Godfather* met *Guys and Dolls*; the second a combination of *Bird Man of Alcatraz*, *The Nun's Story*, and sixties protest; the third *Bad Day at Black Rock*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—all running around inside a tent as generous of spirit as a Walt Whitman multitude.

Writer-producer-director Orlando Bagwell submits archives, witness, remembrance, and scruple. There's material Lee omitted—on Cassius Clay, Louis Farrakhan, and pimping—but Malcolm survives looking a lot like Denzel Washington, as a self-made hero of consciousness, even after we've learned that his brothers joined the Nation of Islam before he did, that they turned on him in obedience to Elijah Muhammad, that he felt guilty about leaving his mother in a mental hospital for 26 years.

In front of us, he *thinks*. He invents himself, then re-creates the invention, changing shapes. Of all the perspectives, from Alex Haley, Gordon Parks, James Baldwin, Sonia Sanchez, even Peter Goldman and Mike Wallace, the most persuasive is Ossie Davis's: "He was indeed our manhood, our shining black prince...."

# Hustler, Icon, Hatemonger, Peace Seeker

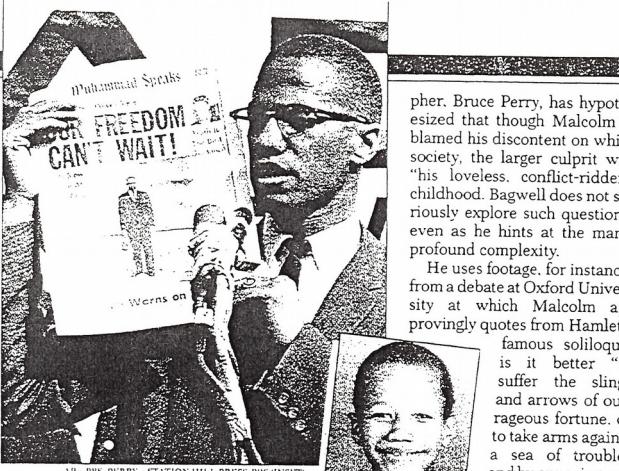
**Malcolm X:** A TV portrait offers some plain truths

**L**IKE A FIREWORK THAT FIZZLES AS IT arcs across the sky, Malcolm X, in dying young, denied his public a fitting finale. His admirers have filled the void with myth—clouding not only the picture of what he might have become but of who he really was.

"Malcolm X: Make It Plain," a two-and-a-half-hour documentary airing Jan. 26 on PBS, sets out to capture the essence of this complicated man. In his 39 years, Malcolm displayed myriad facets: hustler, ascetic, hatemonger, peace seeker. He was a fearless truth teller who distorted his own past: a sly man who was brazenly outspoken; a lover of life who courted death and who calmly prophesied his violent end. Producer-director Orlando Bagwell—working under executive producer ("Eyes on the Prize") Henry Hampton—tells this story unobtrusively, allowing it to unfold largely through the testimony of an array of Malcolm's intimates, including siblings Wilfred, Philbert and Yvonne, the actor Ossie Davis, and writers Sonia Sanchez and Maya Angelou.

**Family reunion:** The program is an engaging and subtly detailed portrait. It is not to be confused with investigative journalism. Bagwell does not try to demolish an icon or unearth embarrassing scandal. Occasionally a detractor surfaces (most notably in the person of Capt. Joseph X, a Fruit of Islam official who believes Malcolm to be a traitor to his religion), but Bagwell essentially is host to a sort of reunion at which beloved family members and old associates reminisce about the great man who once walked among them. Though the documentary purports to be the story of Malcolm's life, it is mostly the story of his *public* life, with only occasional glimpses at the man behind the façade.

That the documentary is less



AP-PBS PERRY-STATION HILL PRESS-PBS (INSET)

**Man and myth:** Malcolm Little becomes X

than totally satisfying may not be Bagwell's fault. By "making it plain," Bagwell and company must forgo the necessarily speculative exercise of probing Malcolm's psyche. Why was he in such inner turmoil? Why did he seem forever at a crossroads? What accounted for his self-destructive streak? What was the true root of his unyielding righteous anger? One biogra-

pher, Bruce Perry, has hypothesized that though Malcolm X blamed his discontent on white society, the larger culprit was "his loveless, conflict-ridden" childhood. Bagwell does not seriously explore such questions, even as he hints at the man's profound complexity.

He uses footage, for instance, from a debate at Oxford University at which Malcolm approvingly quotes from Hamlet's

famous soliloquy: is it better "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them?" Malcolm interpreted the words as an exhortation to struggle against oppression; but as he well knew, they were really voiced as a contemplation of suicide.

Bagwell, playing it straight, does not highlight the irony, leaving us to make what we will of Malcolm's literary allusions—and of Malcolm himself.

ELLIS COSE

## Interview: Orlando Bagwell

### How has Malcolm X been misrepresented in the media?

Because of the nature of the newscast, Malcolm and a lot of others were cast as characters in a great drama that was taking place in America at the time. We always got a portion of a speech or a statement that maintained the image of that character. The image of Malcolm was often skewed to one of a person who advocated violence. So we never got a full representation of the sophisticated challenge he was offering to Black America, to America and to the world. We only saw him in pieces.

### Did you have the same pressures on you that Spike Lee did, to portray Malcolm in the "right" light?

We decided early on to let Malcolm speak for himself, not to try to define him. Any time you do a film about a person that people have such strong feel-

### Why are young African-Americans so taken with him as an icon and a leader?

They see a person who speaks honestly about a reality that hasn't changed so much. [They are] not looking to follow him because they understand you can't follow a dead man. But you can look at a person and learn, and I think that's what they're doing.

### Bagwell: Making it plain

JACQUES M. CHENET—NEWSWEEK



### To what do you attribute Malcolm's constant state of flux, his inner turmoil?

I don't think he was in a constant state of flux. Malcolm was changing throughout his life. He was saying to us that as human beings we all change always. It's about becoming. Here was a man who was not afraid to share with you his process of becoming a person. That made him so interesting. He made his life experience available to all of us.

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NEW YORK, NY 10032

SELECTED QUOTES ABOUT  
*MALCOLM X: MAKE IT PLAIN*  
(Viking, 1994)

Text by William Strickland  
with the Malcolm X Documentary Production Team  
Oral histories selected and edited by  
Cheryll Y. Greene

"The book is a wonderful tribute to Malcolm and will go far in keeping his legacy alive."

--Paule Marshall

"I found it to be a completely new look at the man, extraordinary that there was so much about Malcolm X that had not been revealed before."

--Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell,  
Dean, Tisch School of the Arts,  
New York University

". . . thank you for bringing Malcolm to us through many voices. It was a wonderful presentation and is a beautiful book."

--Lana Turner,  
The Literary Society,  
organizers of annual African-American Read-In,  
New York City

"The best book on Malcolm I've read yet."

--Nat Hentoff

"It is beautiful. Well done. . . . quite an achievement."

--Charles Fuller

"The book is everything one could want: informative, beautifully designed, and a joy to read. We will use the book in developing our curriculum for our Malcolm X exhibit scheduled for September of this year."

--Linda Lucero,  
Associate Director of Education and Community Resources,  
Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena Gardens,  
San Francisco

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*Malcolm X: Make It Plain*  
Selected Quotes

"Malcolm X: Make It Plain is a lovely work."

--Lisa Jones

"Even with the plethora of books already in print on one of America's most enigmatic figures, this well-written biography featuring more than 200 black-and-white photographs--some as rare as they are remarkable--is a welcome addition."

--Quarterly Black Review of Books

MALCOLM X  
MAKE IT PLAIN

Re-airing  
February 1, 1995  
on PBS's "The American Experience"

"An excellent 2½-hour production of 'The American Experience' . . . delicately balancing objectivity with intense intimacy."

— *USA Today*

" . . . an engaging and subtly detailed portrait."

— *Newsweek*

Here's what  
the critics  
say about  
MALCOLM X:  
MAKE IT PLAIN

" . . . powerful . . . it ought to be mandatory viewing for all of America."

— *Earl Caldwell, New York Daily News*

" . . . succeeds as an encapsulated record of the public life of an extraordinary leader."

— *Washington Post*

" . . . riveting and relevant. . . . A fascinating film about a fascinating man. My score: 9."

— *TV Guide*

"MALCOLM X shines as history, as a dramatic personal story and, most of all, as a film with a provocative message . . ."

— *Knight-Ridder Tribune News*

"MAKE IT PLAIN has all the virtues of a first-rate piece of journalism . . ."

— *Entertainment Weekly*

" . . . by far the most balanced, sensitive and thorough exploration of Malcolm's life yet put on film."

— *New York Newsday*